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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study is presented, which attempts to gain a better understanding of the gap between California high school students who are at-risk, who eventually drop out, and who are academically successful. Focus is on families, teacher student relationships, peer influence, and social context. A sample of 10 high achieving and 10 low achieving high school sophomores is used. All of the students are of Hispanic origin and attended Calexico (California) High School. The study involves two interviews at the student's houses (one with the student and one with the student's parents), two classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and friends. Findings indicate that high achievers asked questions and developed successful relationships with teachers they trusted who taught using practical examples. These students' families supported them by their involvement in and concern about education. In addition, successful students allowed friends to support their academic needs and often took a leadership role in explaining concepts to peers. Low achievers disdained school, disregarded homework, disrupted class, copied homework, and often missed classes. Their families offered limited support and were beset with economic problems. Friends of these students had an adverse influence on academic achievement. (JB)

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An Understanding of Academic Excellence Through the Ethnography of High and Low Achieving Secondary School Students

by

Alfredo Cuellar

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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This document is the second part of the *Academic Excellence* project funded by the Cowell Foundation through the Institute of Borders Studies at San Diego State University, Imperial Valley Campus. The field ethnographer for this section was **Mario Martinez**. The entire project owes much to Dr. Reynaldo Ayala and especially to Dr. Marta Stieffel who provided the leadership, efficiency and support that made this project a reality.

Background

During the last decade, several major national studies have been conducted concerning the quality of education in our nation's public schools. In all of these studies there is a consensus on at least two points: the lack of quality in the work of the majority of the students and consequently lower scholastic proficiency; and the the fact that the lowest achievement rates, as well as the highest dropout rates are the Hispanic population.

The Cowell Foundation was interested in advancing toward a local or regional solution of the problem in the border

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area, Calexico, California, U. S. and Mexicali, B. C. Mexico, by supporting a project that goes beyond the typical frame of researching, presenting results, and offering recommendations. After various unsuccessful proposals from the staff at the Institute for Borders Studies to the Cowell Foundation, a project was finally funded which integrated three phases.

1) A binational (U. S. and Mexico) review of the literature related to academic excellence (see *FROM DROPOUT TO HIGH ACHIEVER: An Understanding of Academic Excellence Through an Analysis of Dropouts and Students-at Risk*). This document provided direction for the second phase of the project.

2) An ethnographic study of public secondary school high achievers and low achievers in the cities of Calexico, California and Mexicali, B. C. Mexico. The findings relative to the ethnographic study at Calexico High School are presented in this document.

3) Finally, two panels of experts, one for Mexicali, Mexico and one for Calexico, California, comprised of representatives from the local educational community, that would study both documents. In separate meetings each panel would offer recommendations to design and develop a model to promote academic excellence in both Calexico and Mexicali.

Introduction

In spite of the seriousness of the problem of how to promote academic excellence in America's education, and notwithstanding the hundreds of documents addressing the topic of students-at-risk, there are still many unanswered questions which hamper the possibility of advancing toward this worthy goal.

Research has not been conclusive in explaining the causes or circumstances surrounding the dropout phenomenon. Research has been extremely limited insofar as suggesting direct connections between students-at-risk and academic excellence, and many fundamental questions have not been answered. What makes a student that is in a socioeconomic or minority group that is disproportionately represented in students at risk at-risk be a winner? What makes certain teachers unique and most influential in helping students-at-risk? Why do certain schools collectively move away from excellence despite marked advantages, while others are successful in producing excellence even though they serve a disadvantaged student population?

The problem is so acute that the urgency to implement policy does not permit the educational community to digest the problem and its implications. Thus, they prescribe different therapies without a thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

The same conditions force researchers and administrators to use evidence and studies dealing with places and conditions foreign from their own environments, therefore limiting practical results.

Ethnographic studies are underrepresented in this area, in part because they require a prime time that is not congruent with the exigency of the situation. Nevertheless, ethnographic methods produce conclusions that are descriptive as opposed to predictive, and possibly provide a clearer view of the causes *behind* certain phenomena. This study attempts to foster a better understanding of the gap between students-at-risk, who eventually drop-out, and students who are successful academically. How are they? How are their families? What do they think about their teachers, and how do teachers react to them? What influence do their peers

have on these students' school performance? What is the context in which they interact? These are the questions which the study attempted to answer.

Method

Twenty high school sophomores from Calexico High School (Calexico, CA) were chosen through interviews with a counselor and several teachers. These students comprised a high achieving and a low achieving sample of ten students each. High achieving students had a grade-point average (GPA) of 3.0 or above. The low achiever sample was comprised of students who had a GPA of 2.0 or below. The GPA was not the only criterion that was used. The impressions of the counselors and teachers interviewed were also taken into account. After the selection of the ten students for the high- and low- achieving groups, five students from each group (8 males, 2 females) were randomly selected to take part in the study. All of the students in the study were of Hispanic origin, which reflects the 97% Hispanic student population of Calexico High School.

Meetings were held between the parents of the students in both samples, the students themselves, and the counselors, in order to request their participation in the study. Upon receiving approval, two interviews were conducted at the student's houses, one with the student and one with the family. The interviews also provided an opportunity to examine a student's house, family interaction, and general living environment. Each student was observed twice in different classrooms. The first observation occurred before the interview and the home visit. The second one was conducted after the interview. The choice of which class to observe was taken randomly.

Two to four of each subject's teachers were interviewed in order to corroborate the student's perceptions and

elaborate on his or her performance and attitude toward school work.

A student's friends were identified in two ways: by asking the student who his friends were; and by observing who the student spent time with.

Findings

HIGH ACHIEVERS

Personal Characteristics

1) Questioning: The route to excellence.

Students who succeed question their teachers, their peers, their parents, their family members, and anybody who can provide a venue for fulfilling their interests.

Case #1 Pablo: "While in his geometry class, the student asks questions about material he may not understand..."

"After the class lecture, the student works on his homework assignment and asks questions to both his teacher and his peers around him."

"He asks questions when something they are discussing is unclear to him..."

Case #2 Luis: "In geometry, Luis pays close attention and asks many questions."

Case #3 Juan: "In class, Carlos talks to the teacher and discusses questions with him about the subject area."

Case #4 Carmen: "'I believe that a student must ask questions in order to clarify any points the he/she feels have been left out, or were not very clear. I feel that questions are the only way a person will find out what they do not know. By asking questions, I clarify much information that is necessary to solve the problem.'"

Case #5 Roberto: "[He] ends up asking the questions so as to clarifying points that he has missed."

At other times, the student may not be an aggressive inquirer, but rather an infrequent questioner making intelligent and pertinent queries. Still, questioning is a permanent characteristic of high achievers in this study:

Case #4 Carmen: "She raises her hand rather infrequently, but seems to ask pertinent questions dealing with the subject matter. Thus, her questions are well thought out before she asks her question."

"She is not afraid to ask the teacher for help, although she and her group appear to try to work out the questions before they ask for help."

Case #5 Roberto: "He asks questions of all his teachers during the lecture only when he needs something clarified."

Case #3 Juan: "Most of the questions that he asks must be on something where he does not understand the material at all. He asks questions more to make sure of the material than to clarify it."

Observation suggests that the student may modify his or her use of questioning when the level of difficulty in a given class may require so:

Case #4 Carmen: "In her Algebra class, Carmen does have some problems, and she seems to ask more questions here than in other classes."

Teachers

1) Gaining the Confidence of Students: Trust through Questioning

Students who exhibit a high degree of performance in academic pursuits seem to establish a relationship of trust with their teachers. Those students constantly associate this confidence with the teacher's ability to listen, demonstrate respect, and answer their questions. Hence, their working relationship with teachers is based on the concept of having trust to ask questions. Also, high achievers regard questioning as an efficient learning tool:

Case #2 Luis: " He relates that his teachers usually are patient and they are available when he has a question he wishes to ask."

Case #4 Carmen: "She has a working relationship with her teachers in that she asks them for help when she is stuck on a problem, and only if she has tried almost all other solutions."

Case #5 Roberto: "Roberto feels that a good teacher is involved with a student's need to learn. He expressed that a good teacher guides the student with questions until the answer is obtained."

"About questions, Roberto feels that everyone has questions on material, just that nobody asks them. He feels that by asking, one can get more

information about the circumstances of the problem and therefore more effectively solve the problem. He sees questions as a tool which is necessary for everyone so that any doubts can be cleared up so as to make learning easier."

2) Practicality and Fun:
Two Venues to Success in Teaching

Recurrently, high achievers refer to good teachers as those who instruct through the use of practical examples. Often, this practical side of teaching is also described as fun. Both concepts seem to support each other.

Case #1 Pablo: "He feels that his geometry teacher is his best teacher because of the way the instructor presents the material. He sees geometry as fun and important for his future needs. He particularly likes the way the class is structured so as to maximize time with practical experience. In this class, most of the time is spent on examples and problem-solving skills."

Case #2 Luis: "He places importance on practical applications, so he stresses the sciences and math as being important."

Case #3 Juan: "He feels that good teachers make the class fun, yet are constantly aware that the information that they are giving is important and practical."

Case #5 Roberto: "'The teacher makes the class interesting by showing the practical applications of the class and by making the class fun to be in. By making it fun, we learn the material much faster, because it does not seem like learning, but like a game.'"

Family

1) Family Support Takes Many Forms

This study is consistent with the literature suggesting that academic success is highly correlated to family support, particularly parental support. Most of the times this support is demonstrated by parental involvement in school meetings, participation in school activities, or reaction to a student's report card. However, observations in this study revealed that support, from the perspective of the high achievers, takes varied forms. This study finds that a student's friends have a major role in supporting his or her academic endeavors by fulfilling needs that may have been left unmet by a student's family.

Case #1 Pablo: "Pablo's friends are a great inspiration to him, because they support his learning habits and help him when he has problems, both social and academic. He trusts his friends to help him in his work and can relate to the things they do. He finds that his friends help him unwind from the stress of school by making learning fun and enjoyable. "

Case #2 Luis: "Luis' family generally discusses things during dinner and afterwards. Generally this discussion revolves around school, work, and other social activities. Luis' parents are very involved with his studies. They were present when Luis changed his general science class for Biology in order to remain in college preparatory classes."

Case #4 Carmen: "They seem to influence her somewhat since she hangs around with people who are academically oriented. She feels that her friends help her

maintain her grades up, and in doing so help her to fulfill her goals. By staying with them, she feels that they not only help her academically, but socially as well, for she feels comfortable in their presence, as if to give her strength to go on and accomplish her goals. She feels that friends are an integral part of her success, for without them she would not be as confident about her skills as she is now. She feels that her friends have pushed her into becoming the student she is now, because they are also academically oriented."

Case #5 Roberto: "Most of the time, his parents seem interested in what is going on in their son's school life and about their son's grades. They are involved with school in the sense that they are always there for open house or when it involves the student's grades. They believe that Roberto must get a higher education in order to achieve the same level of success that they share. They strongly approve of the classes that their son is taking since they are college preparatory and, ahead than most sophomores at the high school. Roberto feels that his family's support in taking the classes he is taking helps him do well. "

Friends

1) Helping Others and Working in Groups:
Two Wining Practices

Either because they possess a clearer understanding or because they simply have more interest, high achievers constantly take a leadership role in explaining problems and concepts to their peers or friends. Regardless of the reason, it became evident in this study that such a practice reinforces the student's mastery of scholastic material, therefore confirming his or her own academic success. An additional advantage in this practice is that the frequency with which high achievers take the instructor's role familiarizes them with the didactic methods of their instructors, which once again facilitates their success.

Case #1 Pablo: "They mostly enjoy each other's company, and actively work on homework as a group so that they can understand the work better."

Case #2 Luis: "During group activities, Luis helps others when they have questions about the material they are working on. He gives them hints on how to solve the problems, not just gives them the answers."

Case #4 Carmen: "She works well in her group, contributing more than she receives help."

"She usually does her homework in groups with her friends."

Case #5 Daniel: "He works well in his geometry class, in which he participates in a group. He usually ends up

helping those students who do not understand the material too well, and ends up asking the questions so as to clarifying points that he has missed."

Context

1) Variation and Diversity:
Contrasting Contexts of High Achievers

This study uncovered that the environment or "barrios" where the high achievers reside are most diverse. There is a significant variation not only in economic and social terms but in cultural and group behavior.

Case #1, Pablo: "Pablo and his family live in a small apartment with two rooms, and a small living area and kitchen. They have a small bathroom and no recreational area. He lives in a low-income area of town, where most of the houses are old yet clean. The neighborhood itself is clean and the city park is nearby."

"Most of the people in the student's neighborhood are friendly and help each other all the time."

Case #2 Luis: "Luis and his family live in a high-income section of town. Generally, the streets are clean and there is an ample front and back yard where Luis and his friends meet."

"The street in which Luis lives is somewhat hidden from the general city traffic, thus keeping the street clear of trouble and of traffic. "

"Most of Luis' neighbors are high-income families, and they all watch out for each other. Most of the houses there have both bars on the windows and alarms in their house."

Case #3 Juan: "Juan lives in a rural country road within the city limits. His house is large, but has a dirt front lawn and backyard. The surrounding neighborhood is the same. They all have big lots, but have dirt for their lawns. The neighborhood is not well kept up. There is a dirt lot next to Juan' house, where people have thrown garbage on. Most of Juan' neighbors stay to themselves, and do not come out of their houses."

"The neighborhood is always noisy with the sound of barking dogs or of cars racing down the street. Overall, the neighborhood is always dirty and noisy."

Case #4, Carmen: "Carmen's family lives in a low-income apartment complex which is adjacent to a high-income section of town. There are only dirt lots around her apartment complex for the children to play. The street is a high traffic street, so that it is noisy from morning until way past midnight."

"Most of her neighbors seem friendly. They step out of their apartments just to share news about themselves or other neighbors. They are all protective of their area, and question strangers who appear on the premises. Most of the people around that area have families and are of low-income. They help each other more and this accounts for the cleanliness around the area.

Most of the time, someone was outside gathering up trash or sweeping the area around their complex, so that it would maintain the area clean."

Case #5 Roberto: "Roberto's family lives in a high-income area of town, north of the high school and public library. Most of the houses have ample back yards and front yards. Roberto's house is situated on a street with very little traffic and is relatively quiet twenty-four hours a day."

"His house is large, having four-bedrooms and a two-car garage. Most of the neighbors around his house talk to each other and keep an eye on each others house during the night. Most of the houses have alarm systems in order to protect them from intruders. Most of Roberto's neighbors own businesses or are employed in high paying jobs. Most of the areas have grass fields near the homes for children to play in."

LOW ACHIEVERS

Personal Characteristics

1) Disdain for School: The Core of the Problem

The most consistent personal characteristic identified in the study of low achieving students is their lack of interest in education as it relates to school and school related work.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "He usually speaks of finishing high school in order to get out of it."

"He sees school as something he has to go to for seven hours of the day and then he is free of it."

Case #7, Casimiro: "He is usually assigned tutoring, but does not go because he feels that it is a waste of time for him to go to school afterwards instead of being with his friends."

Case #8, Jose: "He feels that school is a waste of his time and he keeps looking at the clock, hoping that the class will end."

"Some of his friends feel the same way that Jose feels, that school is a waste of time, and that they are just there because they are made to go to school."

Case #9, Rosalinda: "She does not like to spend time in school after being released. She feels that it is wasting the time she can use at home to relax."

Case #10, Lorenzo: "Lorenzo feels that school is not that important to him. He feels that teachers are there to boss him around in order to get paid. He feels that classes are not interesting and that he already knows the material. He feels that he does not need school that much and can get away with knowing what he knows."

"He appears to be bored with the classes he has, and does not do any of the work he is given."

2) Disregard for Homework and Assignments

Closely connected to their lack of interest in school is low-achievers' apathy for complying with the demands of homework. They do not keep a record of their assignments and their general indifference towards school work is clearly apparent.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "He usually does not finish his assignments in class, let alone at home. He does watch TV, after he finishes dinner, and usually while doing his homework. "

"As Rodolfo entered late to English, the teacher said: "Pass forward your homework." Rodolfo, seated in one corner at the end of the room, does not seem to be aware or worried. Rather, he appears to ignore the teacher's remark and shouts to one of the girls in class if she is going to Mexicali that night. The instructor then tells them to take note of the assignment for that week. While everybody takes a pencil or a pen and a piece of notebook or paper to write on, Rodolfo looks around smiling, till he finally seems to realize that the teacher is about to begin his dictation. Only then does Rodolfo stand up, walk to another student seated two rows away from him, and ask him for a pencil. At that time the teacher says: "Rodolfo, are you as usual without anything to write with?"

Case #8, Jose: "He usually got home and did some homework, but gave up when it was too difficult."

Case #9, Rosalinda: "She usually went home from school, talking with her friends about things other than the assignments that she had due the next day. She would get home and work on the assignments until they got too hard for her, then she would quit. She would usually do her work with the radio on full volume and would concentrate more on the music than on the assignment she was doing. "

Case #10, Lorenzo: "He walks home with his friends after school, and does not get home until late in the afternoon. He then sits down in front of the television and watches it until late. He does not do any of his homework. "

"He usually comes unprepared for class, asking several of his friends for a pencil or a pen and a piece of paper to write on."

3) Detrimental Distraction

Another behavior highly associated with low achievers and connected to their lack of interest in matters relating to school is their lack of attention to an instructor's lecture. In this study, low achievers were found to be constantly inattentive and distracted, principally by talking to their peers. The role that friends have in the low achiever's life will be discussed subsequently. A further issue to be considered is that low achievers, by being unprepared, uninterested, and distracted, disturb the entire instructional climate, thereby decreasing the efficiency of the learning process and increasing the animosity between themselves and their teachers.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "They usually talk between, during, and after class. It is this which causes them to miss important items in the class lecture."

Case #7, Casimiro: "He does not ask questions in class but talks to his friends in order to find out what is going on in class. "

Case #8, Jose: "He usually talks during the class about any subject other than his school work. He does not pay any attention to what the teacher is lecturing about. He is usually too involved with his friends to notice what part of his assignment he has missed."

Case #10, Lorenzo: "He usually talks in a low voice with his friends when the teacher is lecturing to the class. When he is called upon to answer a question, the student responds with something completely out of the subject area or with not reply at all."

4) Ditching: reinforcing the vicious cycle

Their lack of interest in schoolwork causes low achievers to be tardy, miss some classes, and eventually drives them to miss entire days of school.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "Rodolfo's parents are only involved with school when a problem with discipline at school arises. This usually occurs since he is either late or absent too many times to one class."

Case #7, Casimiro: "He is constantly in trouble, being sent out to the vice-principal usually because of tardiness, refusal to do work, or frequent absenteeism."

Case #8, Jose: "Most of them [Jose's friends] ditch class whenever possible, and they have made Jose miss school also. "

Case #10, Lorenzo: "Lorenzo could get passing grades, but unfortunately he is absent most of the time."

In some cases the link between low grades, lack of participation, missing homework, and a gradual withdrawal from classes is quite evident.

Case #9, Rosalinda: "She passed most of her classes with C's in the first quarter. During the second quarter, she became more quiet than ever and did not turn in most of her work. Consequently she spent more time outside of class either absent or with hall passes. She seemed to ditch classes that she did not like."

5) Copying: Accepting Failure

Low achievers are confronted with the need to survive in school by doing whatever is necessary to buy time, including copying. This study revealed that copying homework, assignments, and answers during tests from other students is a common practice among low achievers, particularly when a teacher's instructional methodology was deficient.

Case #7, Casimiro: "He spends very little time on each class assignment that he has. He does not have a working relationship with his teachers, he relies on other people for the homework answers and copies most of his work."

Case #9 Rosalinda: "They copy assignments from each other, which they do not understand, instead of going to the

teacher and asking for help. They have gotten so used to copying that it does not bother them that they are not learning anything by copying the homework. It seems that she would rather be with her friends than completing any of her assignments, since she feels that she can just copy any of them from other students in her class before she gets into trouble."

Case #10, Lorenzo: "They do not do any homework together, but they do copy assignments from each other and also copy from each other during tests, which they usually fail."

Family

1) Limited Support

In general, this study confirms the accepted conclusions about the family of low achievers offering limited support, or not support at all to the students; have a low income, and have either a poor or a bad communication.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "Most of the time, the family is yelling at each other about one thing or another."

"They seem to have serious problems in communication. Rodolfo's family does not usually worry about his getting bad grades. They feel that as long as he passes, he is doing all right."

Case #7, Casimiro: "The father is the main authority figure, always yelling at the family when they do not do something right, even if it is something trivial.

The family does not care too much about how badly their son is doing in school."

Case #8, Jose: "Jose's mother only seems to be interested in his earning a living and does not particularly care whether Jose finishes school or not. He does not have any positive role models within his immediate family, or around him, so it is hard seeing where he will get any inspiration to even stay in school. Since Jose's mother works, she usually is not involved with the school. She really does not care about Jose's grades, just whether he has passed or not. She does not motivate Jose into going on to school, although she sometimes tells him to do his homework so that he can at least pass the class. "

Case #10, Lorenzo: "His parents did not graduate from high school. The time that the family was able to share was in the evening around the television set while they were watching novelas. They usually did not talk about what was going on in school, but about the weather or about what was going on with their relatives or people around the neighborhood. The parents are only involved with the school when they are called in to excuse the student's absences. Most of the time, the parents have been called in by the school academic counselor to tell them the options available for their son in order for him to graduate. So far, nothing has been done to help him. Suggestions of summer school or continuation school for the student have not been responded to."

2) Economic Problems and the Military Option

It became evident in this research that the spectra of economic difficulties is present almost permanently in the lives of low achievers. Thus, pressure to contribute economically to the family it is oft conspicuous, other times subtle, but nevertheless constant. The option of joining the armed forces is also a pervasive alternative among low achievers.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "Rodolfo's family does not worry about Rodolfo's future. They feel that he will go to work right after high school with one of his brothers, or will join the military."

Case #7, Casimiro: "There are financial as well as social problems in the house. They seem to argue more frequently than most families, usually about money."

Case #8, Jose: "He wishes to finish high school and start working so that he can earn enough money to buy a car."

Case #9, Rosalinda: "Most of the time is devoted to talking about the problems around the house and about the things they must do to change them. Most of these revolve around the topic of money and how there is never enough to go around."

Case #10, Lorenzo: "He just wants to get out of school and start to work so that he can earn money."

"He just wants to get out of school and start to work so that he can earn money. He feels that he

> can make it without an education, either working or in the military."

Friends

1) Reinforcing Negative Attitudes: Friends as an Adverse Influence

This research reveals that friends play a major, detrimental role in the scholastic achievement of students-at-risk. The influence of friends among low achievers seems to reinforce their negative attitudes toward school and school work. This establishes a culture of negativism and animosity among low achievers that is constantly strengthened. On many occasions, friends fill the gap left by dismembered families. A relevant discovery was that low achievers regarded the junior high school and their freshman years as those critical in making long-lasting bonds of affection which determinedly influence their academic performance.

Case #6, Rodolfo: "Rodolfo's friends are usually the ones from his neighborhood, or those he has met in class which have the same difficulty with the subject material as he does. They usually talk between, during, and after class. It is this which causes them to miss important items in the class lecture."

"After school, Rodolfo and his friends usually walk home together, without any books, and go to a small store to play video games and buy some junk food. Afterwards, they go and watch television at a friend's house, or go out and skateboard or bike ride. "

"Rodolfo's friends are a major influence in his academic life, since they are a source of major distraction from his doing his school work. His friends compete for the time that he has to listen to the teacher by talking to him during the lecture portion of the class. They compete for the free time he has to complete his homework after school. Yet he feels that having his friendship and having fun is more important sometimes than finishing his schoolwork "

Case #7, Casimiro: "Most of Casimiro' friends have known him since junior high school. His friends are all in the same low level classes he is in. Therefore, his friends come from his classes. They usually go home together and stop by the convenience store to play video games or to eat. They usually go to someone's house and watch television or listen to the radio."

"He is highly influenced by his friends, since he hangs around them almost all the time. His time is mostly devoted to what his friends decide to do, which is not school-related. Most of his friends get into trouble by defying the teacher's authority or by ditching school, so he probably does the same thing. They rarely do their homework, which he rarely does also. After school, he is observed constantly playing handball with his friends until late in the afternoon, instead of going to tutoring or going home to do his work. Thus, most of his friends have a great influence on his study habits and on his academic life. His friends seem to dictate his actions towards his teachers, his work, and

his family. Thus, it is clear that they are a significant influence."

Case #8, Jose: "Most of Jose's friends are from the classes he has had, but those he calls his true friends are those that he developed in his junior high school and freshmen years."

"He and his friends hang around the gym playing handball after school until the late hours of the day. They then jump into a friend's car and go to the store to buy something to drink, or to play video games. They usually spend much time together, which they do not devote to anything dealing with school."

"It seems that without these friends, Jose would do better academically, as he would have more time to devote to his studies. Some of his friends feel the same way that Jose feels: that school is a waste of time, and that they are just there because they are made to go to school. Most of them ditch class whenever possible, and they have made Jose miss school also. Most of the time that they spend together they spend playing around, and talking about things other than school. They do not do any work together, nor do they feel the need to do any homework. They usually watch television or listen to the radio more than they do their homework."

Case #9, Rosalinda: "Most of Rosalinda's friends are gossipy and nosy. They are her longtime friends from the neighborhood and from her junior high school and freshmen years. Most often, they spend their time talking in school, in between classes

or during class, and after school, when they walk home together. They usually go to each other's houses and just talk or watch movies together. They also spend plenty of time on the telephone talking about anything except their assignments."

Case #10, Lorenzo: "The student always seems to be talking with his friends and not paying attention to the lecture. Therefore he is always lost and does not ask questions that will tell him where he should start on the assignment."

"Most of Lorenzo's acquaintances are from his junior high school and freshman years, or are friends of his friends. He was usually introduced to friends by his old friends. He usually hangs around with them until the sun goes down, then goes home to watch television. He likes to go out cruising with them in his friends old car, usually until late at night. They sometimes drink in order to pass the time away, usually in the dunes or by the country roads. Lorenzo's friends influence him a great deal. They take him away from the work he must do in order to pass the class."

"According to the high school academic counselor, some of his friends have been sent to the continuation high school because of behavioral problems or because of their grades. It seems that Lorenzo is going through the same period of transition as his friends and that it is his friends who are setting a bad example for him to follow."

Discussion

In conclusion, this ethnographic study has attempted to increase the understanding of students-at-risk and students who are successful academically.

Low achievers share certain personal characteristics: 1) A disdain for school; 2) Disregard for homework and assignments; 3) Detrimental distraction during classes; 4) The practice of ditching, which reinforces their separation from high achievers; 5) Copying, which further legitimizes their failure and prevents them from learning. Their family offers them limited support; while they are beset with economic problems, which forces them to aspire to working as soon as possible, or to enlist in one of the armed services. Finally, friends have an adverse influence in promoting poor academic performance.

High achievers have the following personal, characteristics: 1) They are constantly questioning their teachers, their peers, or anyone. At times, the student may not be very inquisitive, though he or she is distinguished by making intelligent questions or changing his or her style and use of questioning by augmenting its frequency depending of the level of difficulty of the subject. Successful teachers of high achievers commonly have certain characteristics: 1) They gain students' confidence through listening, respecting students ,and seriously answering questions; 2) They instruct through the use of practical examples which contributes to making the class fulfilling and interesting to students. Both concepts, using practical examples and being fun seem to support each other. The families of high achievers support them in varied forms, including 1) parental involvement in school meetings,
2) participation in school activities, and 3) reaction to their son's or daughter's report card. High achievers

recognize that 1) their friends have a major role in supporting their academic endeavors by fulfilling needs that may have been left unmet by a student's family; and 2) the value of constantly take a leadership role in explaining problems and concepts to their peers or friends, therefore confirming his or her own academic success. Finally, high achievers come from differing groups economically, socially, and culturally.